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ABSTRACT

A review of some empirical and statistical evidence documents underrepresentation of women as school administrators and as members of local boards of education. Studies are cited that demonstrate that it is an attitude of prejudice that is the most significant obstacle to women seeking administrative positions. The author's research on attitudes of members of local school boards toward representation and decision-making revealed that women were more responsive to community needs and communicated with important constituencies outside the educational world more than their male counterparts did. Boards with at least two women members were less likely to conceal the decision-making process from the public, and these boards were more likely to have more internal conflict, believed by many observers to be inevitable if boards are doing a conscientious job of responding to the diverse opinions of the people they represent. (MLF)

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The Impact of Sex Discrimination in the Recruitment of Educational Policy-Makers

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This report focuses on two important groups of policy-makers in the field of elementary and secondary education--school administrators and members of local boards of education. The underrepresentation of women in these two groups strongly suggests that institutional discrimination against them does exist. After reviewing some of the empirical and statistical evidence which documents the existence of sexual discrimination, we will explore some of the reasons for it which have been presented. Finally, and most importantly, we will discuss some of the implications of this discrimination and the impact it has on the formulation of education policy at the local level.

Evidence

It is clear that discrimination against women does not exist at the entry level into the educational profession. Education traditionally has been characterized as a "women's profession" and an estimated two-thirds of all elementary and secondary teachers are female.[1] Patterns of discrimination emerge, however, when differential rates of promotion and advancement in the field of education are examined. Or, as Professor Debra Stewart has argued in a discussion of women in top administrative jobs, generally, the issue is ". . .not on jobs per se, but rather on job stratification."[2]

A national survey conducted by the National Education Association (NEA) in 1970-71 revealed that only 15% of the school principals and less than 1% of the school superintendents in the United States were women.[3] Further, it was found that most women administrators are serving at the elementary school level, in positions which have lower pay and less prestige. While 19% of the elementary principals and 34% of the elementary assistant principals were women in 1970-71, only about 3% of the junior and senior high principals were women. At the school district level, the picture is equally dismal. The NEA found that only 7% of the deputy, associate, or assistant superintendents were women.

Perhaps more discouraging is the finding that the potential for advancement by women is not advancing, as it is in other areas, but is actually diminishing. Both Suzanne Taylor and Joseph Cronin have noted the decline in the number of women principals since the 1940's.[4] The proportion of women principals has decreased from 37% in 1960 to 21% in 1970. The absolute number of women superintendents has also decreased in the last ten years from 90 to 84. The picture is clearly a bleak one.

The situation among school board members is similar, but there are some clear trends toward a greater representation of women in this group of decision-makers. Studies of members of local boards of education conducted before 1970 usually reported the proportion of women at well under 10% of the national total. A report issued by the National School Boards Association (NSBA) estimated that in 1972 about 12% of all U.S. board members were women.[5] A survey of more than 1000 board

members conducted by the author in 1975 revealed a proportion slightly over 20%.[6] This survey also revealed that approximately one-third of all school boards have no female members, one-third had one woman, and the remaining one-third had two or more women serving on the school board. Some interesting regional differences emerged, suggesting that women are represented in greater numbers in the Northeast and are most underrepresented in the South and Southeast.

Reasons

Why is it that women are so often excluded from the ranks of school administrators and school board members? The two reasons most often suggested by defenders of the status quo in the administrative area are: (1) that women do not possess the necessary qualifications for administrative positions, and (2) that women do not really aspire to administrative positions. Professor Claudia Young has demonstrated that these arguments are more "myth" than fact. She cited graduate school figures for advanced study in educational administration which indicate that there is a greater pool of women with proper credentials for administrative positions than men.[7] She also cited statistics which demonstrate that a significant number of beginning female teachers aspire to become administrators.

Dr. Suzanne Taylor's explanation is straightforward and has impressive empirical support. She argues that those who hire and promote school administrators simply prefer men to women. In an extensive study of

attitudes toward women as administrators, she found that the only variable which appeared to have any significance in the hiring process was the sex variable. Other variables, such as age, position, and length of service had little correlation with the hiring process. Not only were school systems refusing to hire women as administrators; they were not even encouraging them to train or apply for administrative positions.[8]

The observations of Professor Taylor concerning the negative attitudes which confront women seeking administrative positions are closely related to the concept of "role prejudice" which is discussed by Professor Stewart as an explanation for discrimination in all high-level administrative positions:

> . . . role prejudice develops when there are genetic differences in the human population which are visible, but not significant for role performance. The political implication is that such role prejudice translates into discrimination against individuals who strive to achieve outside of their socially defined role set. It is this "role prejudice," a prejudice shared by women and men alike, that accounts for the political reality of few top spots for women.[9]

It is an <u>attitude</u>, then, of prejudice which is the most significant obstacle to women seeking administrative positions.

This same attitude is a real obstacle to women seeking positions on local boards of education. While some evidence suggests that this attitude is widely accepted by the electorate,[10] substantial evidence is available to support the argument that superintendents of schools are generally

prejudiced against women board members. And a superintendent can be extremely influential in whether or not a board member is elected in his school district. Hopefully, many superintendents would not agree with the Boston-area superintendent who characterized women school board members as follows:

> By and large, women on school committees [school boards] are nitpicking, emotional, use wiles to get what they want, demand to be treated as equals, but have no hesitancy at all to put on the pearls and insist on "respect" when the going gets rough--and they talk too much.[11]

However, in a survey of school superintendents, The American School Board Journal found a majority of the superintendents surveyed seemed to share these sentiments, in whole or in part.[12]

The National School Board Association's Commission on the Role of Women, in a report issued in 1974, concluded that attitude is the single most important impediment to women seeking school board office.[13] However, the Commission also found that this attitude had been institutionalized in many school districts by a mechanism which it termed an "informal quota system." Interviews with hundreds of board members revealed that it was much more difficult for a woman candidate to be appointed or elected to a school board if a woman or women were already serving on that school board.[14] As a result, the Commission's study of more than 500 boards of education revealed only fourteen where women outnumbered men. The writer suspects that similar informal quota systems exist in school administrative systems and other public agencies.

Impact

The major impact of the underrepresentation of women serving in educational administration and on local boards of education is that a major pool of talented individuals is being neglected. This is a tragic waste of human resources, particularly since the evidence suggests that the talent and abilities of women currently serving as administrators and school board members is comparable to, and sometimes superior to, those of men serving in these capacities.

Professor Taylor has reviewed several studies which indicate that women administrators tend to rate higher than men on key administrative characteristics.[15] One study found that women tended to outscore men in ability to work with teachers and outsiders. Women were also more concerned with specific educational objectives and they possessed greater knowledge of teaching methods and techniques. Another study concluded that women were more democratic than men and outscored them in using effective administrative practices. A third study revealed that:

> . . . men had more tolerance for freedom but the women scored better in speaking and acting as a representative of the group, being persuasive in argument, emphasizing production, maintaining cordial relations with superiors in exerting influence, and striving for higher status.[16]

Obviously, these findings can be interpreted in a number of ways. Perhaps the most defensible interpretation is not that women are

inherently superior educational administrators, but that a greater proportion of talented women enter the field of education.

This writer's research on attitudes of members of local school boards toward representation and decision-making revealed some important differences between men and women.[17] For example, when asked about the responsibilities of a school board member which were most important, women respondents emphasized the importance of "hearing complaints and grievances of parents" and "maintaining contact with state and federal legislators" substantially more than their male counterparts. This seems to indicate among the women a sensitivity to community needs and desires and an orientation to communicate with important consituencies outside of the educational world to a greater extent than among male board members. This is extremely significant given that school boards have been criticized for their failure to genuinely represent their communities and to focus their attention toward the school administration rather than toward the community.[18]

Other items in the writer's 1975 survey involved board members' relationships to interest groups in the school district. Responses to these questions revealed a somewhat ambivalent attitude of women toward these groups. On the one hand, women more often than men were likely to be contacted by representatives of interest groups. This finding is consistent with earlier findings about the responsiveness of women board members to district needs and demands. On the other hand, women were less likely than men to initiate contact with groups to try to gain support for a specific policy. Apparently large numbers

of women are uncomfortable with such a strategy, either because they find it to be an unacceptable part of their role, or perhaps because they are too inexperienced to know which groups to contact or the most effective method of initiating such contact.

The 1975 survey revealed two areas of the decision-making process upon which women board members seemed to have an impact. Both of these areas were extremely significant. One important finding was that boards with at least two women members were less likely to conceal the decision-making process from the public. Board members with less than two women on their board were much more likely to report that the board voted unanimously on an important issue, despite disagreement among board members. As Kerr has pointed out, by voting unanimously, a school board conceals from the public any of the arguments which might have been made against the decision.[19] However, the presence of women on the board appears to discourage this pattern of concealment in a significant way, and "open up" the decision-making process to public view.

The second important impact of women on school boards is closely related to the first. Besides not attempting to conceal the internal conflict which existed, boards with at least two women members did, in fact, have more internal conflict. Internal conflict on school boards may be consistent and long-term or it may be random and spasmodic, but boards with more women were more likely to have one type of conflict or the other. The consequences of this decisional factor are extremely significant, for many observers believe that school board conflict is inevitable,[20] and that boards without conflict are probably not doing a

conscientious job of responding to the diverse opinions of the people they represent and are less likely to be deliberating about various alternatives which are available in a given decisional situation.[21] Thus, this research suggests that the presence of women on local boards of education contributes in a meaningful way to a healthier, more realistic, and more open atmosphere of decision-making.

Conclusions

Several writers have suggested ways in which the proportion of women administrators and women school board members could be increased. These recommendations[22] will not be repeated here, but interested readers are referred to appropriate sources listed in the references. However, it is clear from the research reported and summarized here that the nation, its school systems, and particularly its students, are not well served by the sexual imbalance which exists. It seems especially crucial, in a nation which purports to be committed to equal opportunity for all its citizens, that its children (as well as adults) see women acting in leadership roles. And it is clear from the criticism levelled against school administrators and school boards that these positions require all the talent and ability which is available. The waste of human talent which is reflected in the underrepresentation of women in these positions must be corrected.

Notes

[1]Catherine Dillon Lyon and Terry N. Saario, "Women in Public Education: Sexual Discrimination in Promotions," Phi Delta Kappan, 55 (October, 1973), pp. 120-123.

[2]Debra W. Stewart, "Women in Top Jobs: An Opportunity for Federal Leadership," Public Administration Review, 36 (July-August, 1976), pp. 357-364.

[3]National Education Association, Professional Women in Public Schools, 1970-71 (Washington: NEA Research Division, 1971), cited in Lyon and Saario, p. 120.

[4]Suzanne S. Taylor, "Educational Leadership: A Male Domain?" Phi Delta Kappan, 55 (October, 1973), pp. 124-128; Joseph M. Cronin, "Educating the Majority: A Womanpower Policy for the 1970's,' Phi Delta Kappan, 55 (October, 1973), pp. 138-139.

[5]National School Boards Association, Women on School Boards (Evanston: NSBA Research Division, 1974), p. 3, cited hereafter as NSBA.

[6]This survey was administered to a representative sample of school board members attending the NSBA National Convention in April, 1975. For more information, see Paul D. Blanchard, "Women in Public Education: The Impact of Female School Board Members," Journal of Humanics, 4 (forthcoming, 1977).

[7]Claudia K. Young, "Women in School Administration and Supervision: A New Leadership Dimension," NASSP Bulletin, 60 (May, 1976), p. 84.

[8]Taylor, p. 125.

[9]Stewart, p. 360. Stewart borrows the concept from Kenneth Boulding.

[10]NSBA, especially p. 41. Approximately 90% of all school board members are elected rather than appointed.

[11]Carolyn Mullins, "If superintendents could pick their own school board members . . .," American School Board Journal, 161(September, 1974), pp. 25-28.

[12]Ibid.

[13]Summarized in NSBA, p. ii.

[14]Ibid., pp. 2, 41.

[15]Taylor, pp. 125-26.

[16]Ibid., p. 126. The study cited is Helen M. Morsink, Leader Behavior of Men and Women Secondary School Principals (Washington: National Council of Administrative Women in Education, 1969).

[17]For a more complete discussion, see Blanchard, "Women in Public Education. . .," forthcoming.

[18]Norman D. Kerr, "The School Board as an Agency of Legislation," Sociology of Education, 38 (Fall, 1964), pp. 34-59.

[19]Ibid., pp. 53-54.

[20]H. Thomas James, "School Board Conflict is Inevitable," American School Board Journal, 154 (March, 1967), pp. 5-9.

[21]Paul D. Blanchard, "The Divided School Board: A Problem or as it should be?" presentation delivered at the Convention of the National School Boards Association, Miami Beach, Florida (April, 1975).

[22]Extensive recommendations are presented in Lyon and Saario, pp. 122-123; Cronin, p. 139; Young, pp. 85-86; NSBA, p. ii.